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AUTHOR Holmsten, Vicki
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ABSTRACT

This study considered the problem of evaluation--"how do we know when a student is ready to move into the regular college writing classroom." The subjects were culturally diverse students in a basic writing course at San Juan College in Farmington, New Mexico. Findings suggest that: (1) students in the course do not fit neatly into any of the expected remedial categories; (2) students deal with questions of cultural heritage in their own terms; (3) integration of evaluation helped students focus on their needs within the course; (4) teacher-student individual conference time is integral to student success; and (5) students are the best predictors of their own success in the next level writing course. Conclusions state that there is a strong argument for self-directed student placement at the end of basic writing courses and that in the rural, multicultural community college setting of the study the basic writing program is invisible. (EF)

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by Vicki Holmsten

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Report from the Invisible: A Teacher-Research Project in Evaluation in a Community College Basic Writing Classroom

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Vicki Holmsten, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English
San Juan College, Farmington, New Mexico

I am here to tell the story of a research project from a writing classroom at San Juan College in Farmington, New Mexico. This story is set in one section of basic writing that I taught in the fall 1997 semester, a six-credit course called English 095, Basic Writing Workshop. Eighteen students began the semester with me and thirteen completed the semester. As a teacher-researcher, I collaborated with my students as I asked them to consider with me the problem of evaluation. "How do we know when a student is ready to move into the regular college writing curriculum?" is the large question for the project. The "we" of this question is a collaborative "we" that is meant to include teacher, students, and the institution as major stakeholders in this project. Our first college-level writing course at San Juan College is English 111, Freshman Composition--this next course became an integral part in the discussion of our question of evaluation throughout the semester, as we worked with sample student papers and institutionally-defined evaluation criteria for English 111.

Farmington is a city of 35,000 in the northwest corner of New Mexico. It borders the Navajo reservation. The population of San Juan County, our community college district, roughly reflects the multicultural mix of the college population-- approximately 60% Anglo, 30% Native American, and 10% Hispanic. In the group of eighteen students who began the project with me, twelve identified themselves as Native American, four as White/non-Hispanic, and two as Asian-American.

In this context, and further motivated by my attempt to produce an acceptable doctoral dissertation to complete my work at New Mexico State University, I proposed and undertook this project and named it teacher-research for deliberate reasons.

First, I position myself as a teacher because this is my professional history. I began as a teacher-researcher during my years of secondary school teaching.. I position myself as a feminist. With emphasis on collaboration, narrative, and resistance to closure, I see teacher-research as a manifestation of feminist epistemology at work in the world of the classroom I position myself as an advocate of critical pedagogy. Teacher-research represents a democratic impulse to be more inclusive, as it proclaims that we are makers of our own knowledge and works for positive change in the world. I position myself as a researcher. Although the word carries connotations of prestige not normally associated with "teacher," I connect the two purposefully with a hyphen because I work in both worlds.

I worked with a self-conscious respect for the concept of "emergent design," attempting the fragile balance between a workable plan and a space that would allow for surprise and the unexpected insight. From the beginning of this research project class, I asked students to join with me in thinking and writing about this question of evaluation. With student permission, I collected copies of all their written work from this semester. They completed questionnaires, wrote research observation memos to me, and mid-term and final learning letters about their progress. We worked as a class to develop evaluation rubrics for each assigned theme paper, and then worked with partners to examine students' completed theme papers. At the end of the semester they worked in small groups to give preliminary evaluation comments on portfolios from their classmates. Students participated in e-mail conversations with me and classmates, and contributed to an electronic bulletin board that was intended to be another site for discussion of the topic of evaluation in the classroom. In this way, the topic of evaluation of their writing became an essential part of the curriculum of this class.

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I kept journals of my field notes including notes from student conferences, daily observational writing, and collected class hand-outs. With permission of students and the cooperation of the college, I also looked at institutional data about this group of students.

When the semester was over, I had five boxes of collected "data." I approached this material with inspiration from Michael Buraway's extended case study method. In Ethnography Unbound, he suggests this analysis as a dialogue between existing theory and field data that will interrogate points of anomaly where the theory and data do not seem to "fit." I read through the collected data in my boxes while reading theory, and I looked for patterns to emerge. It is from these patterns that I found the different layers of "story" in the record of the semester's work, and discovered what appeared to be some important differences between my basic writing students and those described in the literature. It became apparent to me that my students and I are mostly invisible in the theory-literature and the practice-track of basic writing.

The most surprising observation I make from my reading of the student story of this project is that these students did not fit neatly into any of my expected categories. These students who are often considered "remedial," "other," "border," and/or "marginalized" in the literature of our discipline, appear in my boxes of collected data to be much more complex than this labeling would allow. While most students did display tendencies toward this "border" status, most of them also displayed stronger senses of personal agency. All of these students entered this class with a complicated mixture of abilities, expectations, and motivations.

A portion of the student work from this semester does place students in this slot of "Other" that the institution and the discipline have set aside for them. One student, who I identified as having more of these "border" tendencies than many in the class, wrote at the end of November on our class electronic bulletin board, "I've seen a little progress this semester. What has changed for me is a little improvement in my theme paper. I don't think I am prepared for English 111." This is a small example of the kinds of problems

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with writing, fluency, and self-confidence I saw in the semester's writing from many of the students in the class.

But in strong contrast to this kind of "border" student writing, I saw many more examples of what I came to call "centered" student writing. I use the term "centered" because it represents opposition to the word "border" and for its connotations of students who are centered on their goals as learners. These students showed me that they begin from positions of strength that we too often overlook in our basic writing students. One student wrote in early September, "The strength I bring to this class is my ability to learn. Every morning as I wake up, I have a choice on either to learn or just to sleep. I choose to learn." This young woman displays no "border" tendencies in this statement, and I found many other examples of this "centeredness" in the writing from almost all students in this class.

Another layer of the student story of this project relates to the question of culture. Throughout the semester, I asked students to consider with me how our cultural backgrounds affected our perceptions of the question of evaluation. My initial impressions were that the students largely ignored this question. As I read back through the work of the semester, I came to realize that the students dealt with questions of cultural heritage, but they did so in their own terms, rather than in my terms. Even though students seemed reluctant to discuss the topic in class, perhaps a cultural response in itself, they did engage the topic in electronic discussions, e-mail, and in small group work as they developed their own theme papers on the topic of cultural heritage.

One student engaged the topic of her Native American heritage in all of her semester's work, and this places her solidly in what I called the "centered" students. She wrote, "I am a strong person mentally. I believe that people should be treated equally no matter where they come from. I hate when people always put down Native Americans in general... I think a lot about my people and culture and how I could help in some way...As a student most of the above applies to what makes me a student to this day. I'm willing

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and able to learn more. I want to get a higher education for that is what makes a person get where they want to be in life. And also to help my people, the Native American people." This young woman demonstrates to me that students are willing and capable of considering how their cultural backgrounds affect them as learners in a writing classroom.

Does our cultural heritage affect how we think about evaluation? The answer must be that it does, but it is not an easy question to pursue. I found no direct answers to this, but do observe that the topic was more present than I initially thought. The question deserves our continuing attention. It is worth posing the question with students and bearing the patience to watch and listen carefully for their responses. I plan to continue to work with this question of culture in my continuing research projects with my students.

My teacher-learning story begins as I see that my basic writing students are far more complicated than I would have predicted, immersed as I was in the disciplinary literature of basic writing theory. Another piece of this teacher story is that the research question forced evaluation into the curriculum of the course, and students responded positively to this--by the end of the semester, they reported to me that the focus on evaluation helped them think about what they needed to learn in this course and make the decision to move on to the next writing course or take more time to work on basic writing skills.

Another observation I make here, which will come as no surprise to experienced basic writing teachers, is that the importance that I placed in this course on teacher-student individual conference time appears to be integral to student success. Several students, most notably two Native American students and one of the Asian-American students, used these conferences to their advantage in negotiating the territory of this writing classroom, and it is perhaps because this allowed them to disrupt the "traditional plot of schooling" identified by Timothy Lensmire in "Teacher as Dostoyevskian Novelist." The work of Foucault can help us think about how we might productively question power relationships between teacher and students--other theorists suggest the importance of the questioning and

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readjustment of these traditional classroom relationships, including Gail Stygall in "Resisting Privilege: Basic Writing and Foucault's Author Function" and Dennis Lynch and Stephen Jukuri in "Beyond Master and Slave: Reconciling our Fears of Power in the Writing Classroom." This repositioning must be even more important for basic writing students who come from cultures other than that of the Academy, a heavily Anglo, middle class enterprise. This certainly appeared to be the case in my basic writing classroom.

Another unexpected observation for me at the end of this project, is that these basic writing students were the best predictors of their own success in the next level writing course. In addition to the ongoing discussion of evaluation throughout the semester, I had individual conferences with students at the end of the semester to discuss their plans for their continuing work in writing courses. In all cases, I agreed with the decisions the students presented to me. At an institutional level, the real "proof" of this project is in how well students succeeded in subsequent coursework in college. The numbers are encouraging. Thirteen of the original eighteen students completed the semester in December of 1997. During the spring 1998 semester, six of the eight students who registered for English 111 passed the course with a "C" or better. Of the five students who took other writing classes, either the next level of basic writing or a "Business English" class , four passed with a "C" or better during spring semester. By the end of the fall 1998 semester, three more of the original students had passed English 111 with a grade of "C"or better, bringing the total to nine of the original thirteen who succeeded in the next level course. Two more students are enrolled in English 111 this semester, so there appears to be a good chance that 11 of the original 13 students will get themselves through English 111.

By the measure of our institutional history of success with basic writing students, this represents improvement. We had not done much institutional tracking of these students prior to this project, with the notable exception of a brief study done by our Humanities Division Director two years before this project. His look at institutional data at

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San Juan College seemed to indicate that we might, in fact, be damaging students who took basic writing. He found that students who tested into and then enrolled in our basic writing curriculum had a higher rate of failure in later English 111 enrollments, than those students who tested into basic writing but bypassed the course and enrolled directly in English 111. The fact that 9 of these 13 students from my project class have passed English 111 within a year is a strong positive result. The institution is currently involved in a closer tracking process for all basic writing students, but the results are still pending for broader answer to how we are doing in our basic writing classes as we work on curricular reform.

With these results from my own classroom, I see an argument for self-directed student placement at the end of their basic writing work in a curriculum that emphasizes evaluation, individual conferences with the instructor, and an opportunity for students to define themselves as learners at the college level. Royer and Gilles pose a convincing argument for student self-placement in writing courses, and my work here seems to support their suggestions.

Early on, it became apparent to me in a more analytical reading of both the theoretical literature and the evidence of my students' work that the context where we work at San Juan College is invisible. I added to this a closer look at the practice-track of basic writing by looking through available textbooks and talking to publishers' representatives, and did not find evidence of a "fit" here, either. I doubt that San Juan College's basic writing program is tne only program that is invisible. It seems apparent to me that we do not know a great deal about how basic writing is taught and learned at most institutions in this country.

In a rural, multicultural community college setting, we do not fit into any of the spaces that would seem available to basic writing teachers and students. It makes me wonder if the expected categories truly fit basic writers and basic writing teachers anywhere. I hope that more of us will be asking these questions and publishing and presenting our answers. It is a conversation that needs to be enriched to fill in many missing pieces.

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